FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ABORIGINAL STUDENTS SUCCESS IN SCHOOL IN GRADES SIX TO NINE

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Introduction

Over the past several decades educators have come to recognize the need for schooling that is conceptualized, designed, and administered in a way that meets the diverse, individual, and cultural needs of middle years students. Teachers who work with middle years students never lose sight of the students' desire to be successful and their resourcefulness in spite of past experiences. Teachers are especially mindful that the choices of legitimate opportunities for success that schools can provide are much more expansive than have traditionally been allowed through honor rolls and sports awards. Successful middle years' teachers of Aboriginal students meet a challenge that is two fold:

1. to look to the students in order to understand what matters to them and,
2. To find ways to provide for their collective needs and interests so that they have successes at school.

The major focus of this research was to determine the factors that contribute to Aboriginal students' success, in the middle years, grades six to nine.

Literature Review

The literature available on factors that contribute to Aboriginal student success at school in middle years is limited. Much of the research has focused on the negative aspects of their schooling as it relates to drop out rates. The statistics indicate that many Aboriginal middle years students have not been successful in provincial schools. Saskatchewan Education, 1985 and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 1973 estimated that the cumulative drop out rate for Aboriginal students in grades seven to twelve was more than 90%. More recently, the Federation

of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (1997) reported that in the Aboriginal community, 60% of the population 15 and over have not completed high school. (P. 88)

The National Indian Brotherhood (1973) developed a landmark policy called ***Indian Control of Indian Education***. This document suggested several solutions to First Nations education issues and concerns. These solutions included: a relevant curriculum, involvement of Elders and parents in schools, and the training and hiring of First Nations teachers and paraprofessionals in provincial and federal schools. Other studies conducted in band-operated schools have focused on factors contributing to retention and attrition rates, increased high school graduation rates, and decreased absenteeism among students (Shelly, 1988; Canadian Education Association, 1984; Gardner, 1986).

Some researchers have identified factors of success that have helped Aboriginal middle years students succeed in school (Johns, 1994; Barnhardt, 1994; Pelletier, 1993). Outside factors identified were: favorable government policies, family support and encouragement, supportive peer friendships, and adequate family incomes. Factors within the school and classroom were: community involvement in the school, positive student support services, culturally relevant curriculum, accommodation of different learning styles, and a learning environment that is responsive to culturally diverse students. Students in these studies identified the ability to deal with racism, feelings of alienation, and individual effort as factors relating to their success. Rampaul, Singh and Didyk (1984) and Pelletier (1993) found that teacher expectations do influence academic achievement and classroom behavior and recommend that teachers examine the ways in which they deal with students who are from minority cultures.

Results of research studies have produced many recommendations to improve the curriculum, parental and community involvement, and student support services for Aboriginal students in provincial schools (Saskatchewan Education, 1984; Simms, 1986). A study conducted by Pelletier (1993) suggests that greatest factors that contribute to the success of Aboriginal high school graduates are: family support, self confidence, peer support, extra curricular activities, and being able to deal with racism and prejudice.

Project Description and Research Objective

This study focused on the following general question:

What factors contribute to middle years Aboriginal students' success at school?

The guiding questions used to stimulate discussion with the students were:

1. **What do you like about school?**
2. **Who or what encourages you and supports you to stay in school?**
3. **Why are you still in school?**
4. **What else can you tell me about the things or people that have helped you succeed in school?**

The main research objective was to identify factors that contribute to Aboriginal middle years students' success at school through informal group interviews. Discussion of these factors helped determine what engenders the commitment of students. It will in turn provide teachers an opportunity to strengthen and enhance practice in the education of Aboriginal middle years students in Saskatchewan schools.

Methodology

Qualitative research in the form of phenomenological inquiry was used to address the general and guiding questions in this study. Phenomenology allows researchers and participants to understand the meaning of what life's experiences are like by encouraging explanation and reflection in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what is happening. The phenomenological perspectives of Ricoeur (1976) and Van Manen (1990) were used to establish the research methodology for this study. Both theorists suggest that humans acquire understanding from a personal viewpoint. We used Ricoeur's *approaches to understanding* to gain entry into the conceptual world of the participants. This occurred in the following ways:

1) We accumulated data by interviewing participants five times each. These tape-recorded multiple interviews focused on the general and guiding questions. Group or individual interviews were used depending on the preference of the participants.

2) We distanced ourselves from the discourse situation by having the interviews transcribed into written language. This helped us interpret the data by reflecting what was discussed during the interviews, to analyze the text, and to bring other points of view to help us understand what was said. The text was compared to relevant literature.

3) Interpretation occurred on a continuing basis throughout the duration of the study. During the interviews participants were asked probing questions to insure an accurate and comprehensive description of what they were thinking.

All data collection adhered to the guidelines established by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Regina.

The Research Team

The research team was designed to bring together a cross-cultural perspective. **Lorri Melnechenko** grew up in a Metis community. She is a graduate of the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), and holds a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Regina. She has taught for ten years, eight of which have been in a community school. **Helen Horsman** has been a classroom teacher, a University professor, a Superintendent, and a Director of Education. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Saskatchewan. She has extensive experience in the field of Aboriginal Education and has taught in all the Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs in Saskatchewan.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by searching and arranging the interview transcripts into units of meaning by using the process of isolating thematic statements suggested by Van Manen (1990). Ricoeur's (1976) process of understanding, explanation, and comprehension were used to supplement Van Manen's approach to isolating themes.

The *shared meaning-making* approach to inquiry allowed us to effectively grasp what we call the *students' voices.* The students were given the opportunity to interact and talk in an informal, nonthreatening environment. This approach also provides enough depth and detail to *take the reader into the setting.*

To insure that the methodology of this study produced reliable and valuable results we used Mishler's (1991) concept of trustworthiness to make meaningful interpretations and explanations. Guba (1981) maintains that for a study to be trustworthy and therefore reliable and

valid it must be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Aspects of this study that contributed to its validity and reliability are:

1) prolonged engagement - data collection took place over a four-month period,

2) member checks - participants were given the opportunity to read copies of the transcripts throughout the data collection process.

3) peer debriefing - because credibility can be endangered by the bias of one of the researchers. Both members of the research team read and discussed the transcripts in order to ensure a *thick description* which provides an accurate picture of the context of the study.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

This section introduces the participants in the study. It also presents the data that were formulated with the students during the interviews. This material was generated over approximately a four-month period from March to June 1997.

Raw data was edited by omitting such words as "uh" and "you know." This editing helps provide for ease of reading while not skewing the data.

The analysis of data is presented within the parameters of the theme listed below. This theme was generated from the transcripts of the informal interviews. Because the objective of the research was to collect data from middle years students around their beliefs about how and why they can succeed in school that was the major theme that emerged. There were also several sub-themes that emerged. These sub-themes were similar for most students therefore the analysis and interpretation of data obtained from all students are presented together. However, this study was not intended to be a comparative so comparisons between what the students said are not made.

The main theme emerging from the data analysis was: **Aboriginal Middle Years Students Beliefs About Factors That Help Them Succeed at School.** The sub-themes emerging from the main theme were:

1. **Defining Success**
2. **Family Influence**
3. **Healthy Relationships with Teachers**
4. **Programming and Curriculum**
5. **Peer Support.**

The intent of this study was to let the students' voices tell the stories. From this perspective the quotes from these students permeate the presentation of the data.

Participants

The participants in this study were 18 middle years students, grades six to nine, from six rural and urban schools in southern Saskatchewan. The urban participants were all students from community schools.

Defining Success

Every student wants to believe in himself or herself as a successful person. However, one of the obstacles in looking at the factors contributing to Aboriginal student success in school is the definition of success. Goulet (1996) contends that success in one culture may not be defined the same as it is in another. It is the different people involved in the students' education who have different views of success that constitutes its meaning. Aboriginal communities often define success as mastering a curriculum and retaining culture heritage. A European culture measures success in school by measuring academic achievement. A First Nations Elder, James Ironside has said to students "try to learn your culture and get an education. When you have these two things,

then you will be strong" (Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, 1989). Aboriginal people look at a wide range of factors when determining success at school.

The students in this study shared their perceptions of success in ways that mattered and felt right to them. For example, Sheryl explained her thoughts around success as follows:

> *My uncle, he's very successful, he doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, he has a good job, he makes sure he gets food on the table.*
>
> *My mom would say that I am intelligent, smart, and talented. At home I just go in the bedroom cause you'll just get distracted by the television and you know that's self discipline. Those are both examples of success.*

Other students were able to identify a number of factors when they were asked to discuss what they felt made them good students and helped them succeed in school. Linda said:

> *I'm a hard worker, I'm intelligent, I'm a caring person I guess. I'm respectful and I'm respecting, I guess that's it.*
>
> *Things I can do that will help me be successful are things like not skipping classes, and not talking back to teachers, not using bad language in the library. Not acting up in the gym and cleaning up afterwards and the teacher trusts me so I can be the boss of the stage.*
>
> *While I'm here, I work hard. I don't really work hard at home or anything, but what else is there to do here, instead of just work, so you might as well just put a full job into it instead of goofing around.*

Ann felt that being in regular classes as opposed to being placed in special classes was a sign of success.

> *I'm not in any special classes. I'm in a regular math class and all of my friends are in a different math class and there are five First Nations people in a regular class. I don't get into trouble a lot and I think I do what I'm told.*

Statistics continue to show that achievement gaps between majority and minority students in Saskatchewan schools persist at nearly all age levels and in all subject areas. Perhaps the biggest

reason for this disparity is that while our student population has grown more diverse over the past several decades, individual schools have remained largely homogeneous. Even in schools with diverse student bodies, Aboriginal students find themselves removed from the mainstream and segregated into remedial programs in disproportionately large numbers. Too often these remedial classes lack the hallmarks of a challenging, engaging curriculum.

Penny explained how the principal would measure her success at school:

> *The principal would say you behave, and you get your work done. You don't spend time at the office.*

She also said success was about:

> *Getting my work done, helping out around the school, participating in sports, I show a lot of good sportsmanship and I go to practices.*

Christa said:

> *Well, my mom helps me succeed; my family, my sports and everything around me.*

It is clear that these students have differing but related views of what being successful at school means. Also, regardless of the degree of success they seemed to be experiencing in their schools at the time of the study they were eager to be optimistic, receptive to the idea of making a fresh start, and willing to try again.

Family Influence

Educators have come to know that there is a positive correlation between success at school and positive family influence, support, and relationships. The words of the students in this study centered around communication, expectations, respect, and affection. Several times students talked about the support and encouragement their immediate and extended families gave them that helped influence their success at school. For example Adele said this about her writing:

My dad says writing must be my talent. At night my brain would just come alive - I have some good stuff at night, but I had to have inspiration. My moms' rain dance outfit, yeah that was a good inspiration. Cause the colors in her dress and all that and it was the print too, you know. It just came to me. The poem was about my mom dancing in that outfit.

Other students talked about how their family members set high expectations for them to succeed in life and that finishing school was a stepping stone to that success. Christa explained it this way:

My mom doesn't really encourage me. I just don't have the choice of staying home. I am just expected to go to school. I just like coming to school and if I don't come to school I won't be able to play sports! Also we have a lot of people living in our house and when I want to study I go downstairs and they leave me alone. I study for a while and then they ask me questions.

Linda reinforced this concept when he said:

I guess my family encourages and supports me. They always have high expectations for me to at least pass high school and stuff. I know that because my mother tells me!

Penny talked about the influence of extended family. She said:

A lot of my relatives like the ones I see all the time, they just tell me to do all these things and not to drink and smoke. My parents, all of my relatives, my older friends that maybe already graduated, or just dropped out, I don't know, they just wanted me to finish school. My parents are there, they say finish your homework and they will give me reasons why I have to.

When Sheryl was asked who encouraged her to stay in school she related her stories about the influence of several family members:

When I tell my older sister that I get lower marks like in science she says don't compare yourself to the lowest kids, compare yourself to the highest kids and it just makes me want to have better marks. And my mom is in school too. My sister graduated from this school. Seeing everyone get good jobs - my cousin Danny loves earning money and my Auntie Laurie works in a day care.

Mary said:

My mom helps me succeed in school by helping me with my homework and she encourages me to stay in school. My aunts and uncles and my grandparents talk to me about staying in school. They really want me to graduate. My uncle Morley only has a grade six education and he encourages us to get more than that. He's thinking about going back to school.

Kerri said:

My Auntie Louisa teaches me about my culture. She taught me how to speak Saulteaux. She also tells me stories about when we were on the land. She teaches me how she does sweet grass. She has a medicine wheel. She talks about not ruining God's creations.

Kathy adds:

My family makes me happy, my aunts and uncles. Sometimes I come home and I have done something wrong and I tell them and they will give me some advice, they tell me what to do next time. When I have a bad day they just say "want to talk about it" and then we go out somewhere like to the ice cream store or something. I let my feelings out.

It is clear, the words of the students in this study confirm that the impact and influence that family has on students' success in school are profound. This points to the importance of increasing and enhancing the home - school connection. Middle years teachers promote and cultivate this connection by aligning care givers, community, and the school in re conceptualizing ways in which this strong, positive family influence can have a more meaningful effect on students' success. Schools can enhance opportunities for student success by encouraging the active participation of parents and community members in student learning. Many parents and care givers are able to enrich programs, help solve problems, and enhance learning activities for students.

Healthy Relationships with Teachers

Recently educators (Wubbels et al., 1997; Borich, 1988; Fisher et al., 1995) have professed that *it is the teacher's interpersonal skills that are crucial to creating and maintaining a positive working climate* (Wubbels et al., p. 82). Good teaching requires an interpersonal repertoire that is both broad and flexible. Their research showed that according to middle years students the best teachers are strong classroom leaders who are friendlier and more understanding and less uncertain, dissatisfied, and critical than most teachers. The best teachers also allow more freedom than the norm. Their research also claims that good teachers are both dominant and cooperative. They should be able to empathize with students, understand their world, and listen to them. Setting standards and maintaining control while allowing students responsibility and freedom to learn are also essential. Good teachers know how they are being perceived and are therefore better able to align their instruction with student needs and preferences. In addition to mastering the methodology necessary to design lessons and implement the curriculum teachers must develop communicative techniques that establish favorable relationships with students. Both sets of skills are important. In fact, relationship-building is a prerequisite to a positive classroom environment.

Many of our questions and much of our discussion centered around the relationships and interactions these students had with their classroom teachers, other teachers in the school, and in-school administrators. There were several common threads that ran through the dialogue. They included respect, fairness, safety, trustworthiness, a sense of humor, and achievable challenges.

These students wanted their teachers to engage them in regular open conversation and they wanted that this conversation be characterized by careful listening and thoughtful reflection. They also hoped that teachers would candidly convey their questions and puzzlement.

Privacy was important. Students often needed an adult ear and they needed to trust that the listener would not find their feelings funny or trivial and would be kept confidential. Kathy:

> *I like some of the staff cause if you treat them nicely they'll be nice to you and stuff and if there's a problem on the playground or something you can't handle yourself, they'll be there to help you.*
>
> *Some of the kids - sometimes little kids get all cheeky and you get into trouble for it and they don't.*

Donna explained:

> *Sometimes some of the staff they get all mad at you because they're having a bad day or something, you're in the wrong place at the wrong time.*
>
> *I get sad when the teachers don't listen to me; when you ask a question and they just ignore you and start talking again. They don't pay attention to you or something and you get all mad at them and then you have to go to the office. So you get into trouble cause you asked a question and they didn't listen to you.*

Kathy agreed:

> *Sometimes the principal blames us for stuff and we'll talk to her and she just says "oh yeah," whatever, and sometimes we get into trouble a lot and they don't believe what we say.*

Donna continued:

> *And when the teachers or other adults say something they think they know the right thing and then the kids argue with them because they think they know it and people just do not listen to each other.*
>
> *I feel comfortable talking to some of the staff, but the other part of the staff they don't really listen to you. They just go and tell someone else.*

The middle years students we interviewed wanted and needed to respect and believe in their teachers. They also explained that teachers, on the other hand, needed to earn that respect. A teacher's real authority, at least in the eyes of these middle years students, exudes two way respect. Respected teachers don't just verbalize what they believe, they demonstrate their values in their interactions with students. In the vernacular of the streets, kids take notice when "teachers don't just talk the talk - they walk that talk." Teachers who earn and enjoy the respect of their students are the ones who show their understanding, are fair, and trustworthy. Nothing is more likely to alienate students than their perception that a teacher has been unfair or caters to favorites. Middle years students have their own notions of how things are supposed to work and teachers need to listen to, understand, and appreciate these notions. Phelan at al. (1992) confirm:

> *Students want teachers to recognize who they are , to listen to what they say, and to respect their efforts. In classrooms where personalities are allowed to show, students respond more fully, both academically and personally (p.696).*

Noddings (1992) agrees when she states:

> *Good teachers do not reject what students see and feel, but rather, work with what is presently seen and felt to build a stronger position for each student. To do this requires the creation and maintenance of a trusting relationship.* (p. 107)

The words of the students in this study and the literature confirm that effective and productive, positive teacher-student relationships are characterized by 1) empathy, caring and compassion, 2) a conviction that every child not only can but will learn, 3) active listening, 4) confidentiality, 5) respect, and 6) trust.

Programing and Curriculum

Several Saskatchewan Education initiatives articulate the commitment and process of integration of Indian and Métis perspectives into all Kindergarten to Grade 12 programming and curriculum (Directions, 1984; Indian and Métis Education Policy from Kindergarten to Grade 12, 1995). The policy document makes this statement:

> *Saskatchewan Education recognizes that the Indian and Métis peoples of the province are historically unique peoples and occupy a unique and rightful place in society today. Saskatchewan Education recognizes that education programs must meet the needs of Indian and Métis peoples, and those changes to existing programs are also necessary to benefit all students. (p. 2)*

The document also outlines four principles to guide the development of education programs for and about Indian and Métis peoples. The principles most relevant to this research are: 1) that teachers need to be mindful that Indian and Métis culture is different in many ways from those who established the provincial school system, 2) that there needs to be a coordinated effort at all levels and in all communities to meet the needs of Indian and Métis students, and 3) that programs to improve the success of Indian and Métis students in school are focused primarily at the school community level. (p. 1) With these principles in mind Saskatchewan schools continue to make an effort to celebrate diversity and to decrease ethnical and racial conflict. The celebration of diversity and an analysis of prejudice have parallels in schools, because the school population reflects the community.

Educators sometimes view the affective domain separate from curriculum and instruction. However healthy student-teacher relationships, relevant curriculum content, and accommodating

instructional approaches can also demonstrate an attitude of caring about students. Rogers & Webb (1991) state:

> *Caring, in the professional sense recommended here, is not merely the development of warm, interpersonal relationships. It must be embodied in the curriculum, not in the narrow sense of course work . . . Students are to be involved in the construction of the curriculum. By developing a conception of curriculum as shared experience and ongoing process, the caring context of the program becomes concrete.* (p. 177)

The learning program at the middle level should offer a full range of supports aimed at increasing students chances of academic and life success. Adaptations to the content, instructional practices, and learning environment are necessary to reflect the needs of all students. Students were asked if they could design a perfect school for students in Grades six, seven, eight, and nine what should it like. Their responses were as follows. Donna said:

> *It would be big and you would go on lots of field trips. There would be lots of activities you could go to. Students and teachers would be respectful to each other.*

Kathy said:

> *It would be small. People would be nice and kind and respectful. Students would always go on field trips and raise money for more field trips. My teachers would take us places like the science center or museum. We would get to get out of the classroom and get to see different things we haven't seen before.*

Colleen talked about what she liked most about school:

> *I like the activities we do. We go camping and when you are in grade six, seven and eight you get to stay there overnight. I like going to the Science Center, on field trips and to track and field. I also like gym, math, science and social studies.*

At a school where a Cree Language program was offered one student shared their insights into the content of the program:

Donna said:

I learn about my culture from my Grandpa and Grandma and from my aunt. In the Cree program we did different things like we study about Natives and First Nations and how they helped us and stuff. We drew pictures and sometimes we made teepees, and shields. We learned how to say words, like a couple of years ago we learned the words for the different kinds of food. I guess its fun. We got to learn about our culture and stuff.

However, all the students in this study had dropped out of the Cree program. They shared the following information. Kathy said:

We dropped out a couple of months ago. I don't know, we just kept sitting there and doing the same thing over and over. She kept promising to take us to see different things but she never did. I enjoyed it when we did activities and made journals and did beading and made shields.

Teachers provide an exciting array of activities in which all students can experience success. Opportunities for student success is enhanced when children learn within their community and when we bring the community into the classroom. Exemplary teachers are prepared to take the risk of involving their students in learning experiences that explore the culturally rich life of Aboriginal students. As they create these situations and this curriculum, they become learners themselves. Both teachers and students begin to model values and attitudes that are reciprocated by students, and benefit everyone. It is expected that curricula and materials will: concentrate on the positive images, reinforce and compliment beliefs and values, include historical and contemporary issues, and reflect the legal, political, social, economic, and regional diversity of Aboriginal peoples.

Peer Support

Securing a place of some status in their peer group is something many adolescents are concerned about. They want to be part of a group that they can trust. Young adolescents have a powerful drive to form relationships with peers and find a niche in the group. They derive feelings of safety and reassurance from knowing they are part of an accepting, approving peer group. Much of their personal development is done by comparing them with others in their group. The students in this study talked about the importance of friends. Donna said:

> *I tell them secrets and stuff and I tell them different things about my family life if something is happening in my family and they won't tell anyone else. Like they won't go blabbing off to different friends or something like that.*

When asked what were the things in their life that make them happy she said:

> *My friends, if I'm going through a tough time or having a rough day, they support me and understand my feelings and stuff. They tell me jokes and we just have a good time. My friends make me happy because we can have talks. We tell jokes and secrets.*

Kathy agreed:

> *Friends are important because they keep your secrets and they always tell the truth.*

Erika confirmed these feelings:

> *My friends make me happy because they are always there for me and they're nice and they understand me.*

The students in this study relied on and found comfort in the strong peer relationships they formed with their friends. These relationships are engendered over extended periods of time. In some situations where transiency prevails, middle years' students are not able to form substantial peer relationships. Based on what these students said about the importance of the support their peers give them, it seems reasonable to assume that if these relationships are severed that this will

have a significant impact on the continuity of peer support. To these middle years' students peer relationships were as important as student-teacher relationships and family support.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that contribute to Aboriginal students' success at school by listening to the voices of middle years students. The shared meaning making approach to inquiry we used allowed us to effectively grasp what we called the students' voices. In light of our discussions five predominant themes emerged. The encompassing theme was: **Students' Views of What they Believed Constitutes Success**. Based on our discourse with the students four other themes developed. These included:

- **Family Influence,**
- **Healthy Relationships with Teachers,**
- **Programming and Curriculum, and**
- **Peer Support.**

We came to understand that these students had varying conceptions of success. For example, many students in this study said that obedience and respect were indicators of success while others claimed it was self discipline in terms of getting work completed at school and home as well as promptness and good attendance. Other students associated success with staying out of trouble and not drinking and smoking. Some students maintained that using their talents, supporting other students at school, particularly younger students or siblings, and believing that you can get a job characterizes a successful individual. Academics were acknowledged but not

necessarily as the strongest indicator of success. For example, one student felt successful when she was placed in a regular academic stream as opposed to modified classes. It is clear that the students in this study encompassed a broad view of success and their beliefs were not limited to traditional European assumptions of what it means to be successful at school.

Regardless of what middle years students' academic, athletic or personal needs and interests may be, we can be certain that every student needs to have positive, satisfying relationships with and support from family or care givers. The students in this study dwelt on the importance of family. They felt that their immediate or extended family provided a forum by which they could share their concerns and accomplishments. In several cases family members became role models and examples of what to aspire to. In most cases family was the nucleus of support for these students.

Teachers' interpersonal skills are pivotal to students' success at school. Middle level students relate to teachers who are friendly, understanding, flexible, trusting, and good listeners. It is particularly important for teachers to model these attributes, not just to talk about them. For example, students recognize when teachers are listening authentically to them. This increases their probability for success as well as the degree at which they will enjoy or "buy into" school. The fact that the effort is being made is persuasive in itself, whether or not the student has things exactly as she or he might want them.

Students need to believe that their teachers will advocate for them. Good teachers assure students that they will do what they can to help them so they will not fail. They cannot, of course guarantee success, but they can go a long way to assure their students about their confidence in them and in themselves. Stevenson (1992) promotes the idea of teacher advisors for small groups

of students (one adult and not more than twelve students) to meet daily and to serve as the students first line of affiliation with their school. An advisor helps students become more successful in their academics, gives them a sense of belonging, and provides a communication network between people in the school and with the responsible adults outside the school.

The blending of cultures in Saskatchewan schools raises important questions about students' racial and ethnic identities. Many Aboriginal students in middle years classrooms are faced with ethnocentrism and discrimination. It is critical that middle years teachers help students understand and process these issues. Exemplary middle years teachers are sensitive to a variety of family configurations and the cultural influences in which students are living. Responsible middle years teachers consciously strive to gather together strategies for working with students that are responsive to their nature and needs. All of these strategies must be the means to the greater goal of helping middle years students be the very best young adolescents they can be. If their lives are meaningful, rewarding, and responsible while teachers are with them, they will be far better prepared for the challenges ahead. Stevenson (1992) maintains there are other payoffs:

> *In taking care of young adolescents by sustaining their spirits nourishing their minds, feeding their hunger for self-definition, and affirming their existence, we are able to take good care of ourselves - upholding our own spirits, stretching our minds, and defining ourselves as "teachers of young adolescents" affirming our own existence. (p. 332)*

Based on what the students in this study said, it seems logical to say that there are special traits, skills, and inner resources that teachers possess that support and enhance nurturing behavior. Students want teachers to be genuine and authentic. They want to be able to interact with teachers in a way that engenders trust and acceptance. They need teachers who are good listeners and who have strong problem solving and empowering skills. When these traits, skills

and inner resources are melded together within a teacher, the synergistic effect appears to enable a teacher to competently pursue the mission of helping young people reach their fullest potential - cognitively, socially, emotionally, and morally.

Strong middle years teachers look on their students as partners and cohorts in an effort to make living and learning as rewarding as possible. They do not just acknowledge the legitimate claims students make for respect, safety, and reasonableness. They energize their commitment with investments of time, patience, and good humor that evidence their trustworthiness.

Lipsitz (1984) observed that attaining the characteristics of successful schools depends on recognizing and working with pressing aspects of growth and development during the middle years. Teachers are able, therefore, to assess individual student growth from an enlightened frame of reference. Teachers then make apporpriate adaptations because they are well acquainted with their student's special interests, activities, talents, and social dispositions.

Quality programming and curriculum in middle years classrooms offers a full range of supports, options, and adaptations. In this sense it is closely related to the factors that contribute to healthy relationships with teachers. In order to enhance opportunities for Aboriginal student success in the middle years, exemplary teachers foster ways in which teachers and students create a culture of caring, understanding, empowerment, and trust. Teachers and students together, as community of learners in the classroom, create a learning environment that is flexible, supportive, equitable, accepting, freeing, and respectful. It is understood that the teacher brings knowledge of the students, of pedagogy, curriculum and resources, a repertoire of instructional methods, culture and language, and varied interests. The students bring culture and language, previous experience and background, varied interests, curiosity, and an ability to learn. Together they plan,

take risks, make decisions, collaborate, communicate, think, and evaluate. The students in this study preferred active learning that took them into the community. Phelan et al. (1992) note that the words of these students concurred with learning theorists who claim this about the kind of learning students prefer: *"They prefer an active rather than a passive role; they prefer transaction rather than transmission"* (p. 699). They go further to say that in classrooms where active involvement is the norm and teachers draw students into discussions: *"ideas are explored and thoughts, feelings and opinions are shared. When this happens, students feel valued as thinking, feeling individuals whose ideas are important"* (p. 700). In the words of the students in this study and Rogers and Webb (1991), caring should extend into the construction of curriculum that is developed based on the needs of the students.

Students told us that they needed to be a part of a peer group they could trust. There is no question they had a powerful drive to form a relationship with their peers that was encompassed by talking, listening, support, understanding, fun, and truthfulness. Not unlike the relationships they needed to have with their teachers and the support they needed from their families, these students thrived on the bonds they created with their peers. This range of relationships form the cornerstone of Aboriginal middle years students' success at school. Respect and honor between adults and children derive from associations encompassing genuine mutual interests and fun times that are meaningful for both generations. Enjoying students does not take the place of relationships that are strictly adult, just as adult relationships do not replace students' values and needs for peer relationships.

The approach used in this research clearly demonstrated the importance for students at the middle years level to have the opportunity, through dialogue, to identify, reflect, and self evaluate

those things necessary for success and self determination. The dialogue we had with the students required them to think about their relationships with family, friends, peers, and teachers. It also required them to think about programming and curriculum. Students were able to identify the circumstances, support systems, attitudes and behaviors associated with what they felt helped them succeed at school. Their words give teachers a better notion of individual expectations and to what degree they can challenge and encourage Aboriginal students to greater success in the classroom. George at al. (1992) confirm this notion when they state

> *Teachers also serve children particularly well when their standards and learning challenges require students to stretch themselves to succeed, so long as the degree of stretching is within students reach (p.22).*

Students need to have unbiased, unchallenged opportunities to think about and talk about their own agendas with parents and teachers. Teachers provide the structure and facilitate the process. For example in schools where student-led conferences are an integral part of evaluation students take responsibility and ownership for their behavior and academic achievements. Students then have control of themselves. In this sense self determination results, empowering students in all aspects of the school program.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this research the following recommendations are offered to individuals concerned with the education of Aboriginal middle years students.

1. It is recommended that teachers look for ways to expand traditional thoughts and practices concerning success to more encompassing beliefs that actively embrace a wider

range of students and honors diversity in its broadest sense. This can be done by giving students opportunities to explore and discover their thoughts about success. In turn they begin a process of redefining the conventional perception of what it means to be successful. The approaches teachers use to evaluate and assess students also need to be addressed in order to encompass this broader view of success. Teachers are encourages to take opportunities to more fully understand and implement the concept of multiple intelligences.

2. The significant impact of family on the success of Aboriginal middle years students cannot be underscored. It is recommended that teachers continue to incorporate strategies that enhance and support relationships between the home and the school. Student-led conferences allow students to share, demonstrate, and celebrate their learning with both teachers and family. Informal gatherings, initiated by the school community, that invite families into the school are encouraged. Cultural activities and celebrations provide opportunities for students and their families to honor their heritage together and to share it with others.

3. The influence middle years teachers have on their students is significant and the positive relationships that develop between students and teachers are fundamental to quality learning. It is recommended that teachers place priority on first cementing foundations and then constructing a framework for these relationships. When teachers listen authentically to students, advocate for them, are culturally sensitive, trustworthy, and look to their students as cohorts they create a community of learners in the classroom. A First Nations educator, Sheryl Farrell-Racette once said to teachers "you will know that you

have established a positive relationship with your Aboriginal students when they tell you about and want you to meet their family." It is recommended that the partners in education explore creative ways for middle years teachers and Aboriginal students to network with other teachers and students to share their successes around building strong, trusting relationships with Aboriginal middle years students.

4. The curriculum and programming designed for Aboriginal students in middle years classrooms need to demonstrate an attitude of caring. In order to increase the chances of academic and life success teachers empower students by involving them in creating curriculum. Students thrive when learning experiences are expanded beyond classroom walls into the community. It is recommended that teachers explore ways of involving community in the classroom and the classroom in the community. A key component of curriculum and instruction for Aboriginal students is that they are involved in learning experiences that explore their culturally rich heritage. Culture, is learned, it is not taught. However, it is recommended that teachers teach the concept of culture and provide opportunities for students to participate, share, and explore their thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, and practices. In this sense both teachers and students become learners. The natural, informal exchange of information provides an opportunity to walk in another's shoes. This creates a spirit of curiosity, understanding, and acceptance.

5. Family and teachers play a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal middle years students. However, during adolescence there is a powerful drive to form relationships with peers that is less guarded and more accommodating than those they have with adults. It is recommended that teachers focus on providing opportunities that foster the building of

peer relationships. This rapport can be cultivated by adopting instructional strategies and providing learning experiences that enhance symbiotic bonds. It is further recommended that teachers provide occasions for Aboriginal students to create their own culture in the classroom in ways that empower them and enhances their ability to "buy into" the school.

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